

SEBASTIÀ JUAN ARBÓ

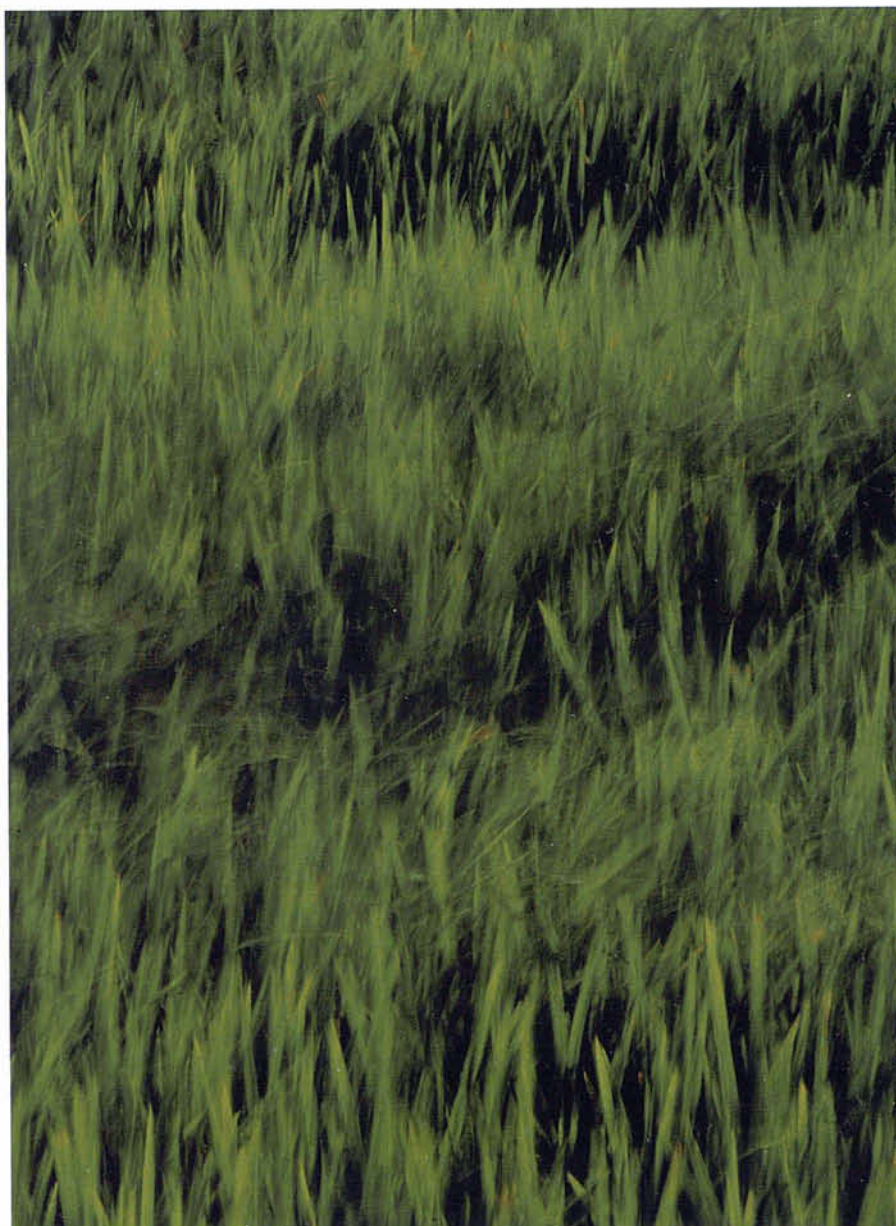


EBRE DELTA

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SEBASTIÀ JUAN ARBÓ (SANT CARLES DE LA RÀPITA, 1902-BARCELONA, 1984) DIED, LIKE SO MANY OTHER CATALAN WRITERS, CONVINCED THAT HE HAD NOT RECEIVED THE RECOGNITION HE DESERVED. A NOVELIST, BIOGRAPHER AND JOURNALIST, HE CAUGHT THE PUBLIC EYE IN 1931 WITH "L'INÚTIL COMBAT", QUITE AN INNOVATION IN CATALAN AND EUROPEAN LITERATURE. THE PUBLICATION THIS YEAR OF HIS "OBRA CATALANA COMPLETA" HAS ONCE MORE MADE AVAILABLE TO READERS ONE OF THE SOLIDEST CREATIONS OF ANY CATALAN NOVELIST THIS CENTURY.

EMILI ROSALES AUTHOR



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RICEFIELD, EBRE DELTA

The life of Sebastià Juan Arbó is the story of an uncommon passion for literature and total devotion to writing. Born in 1902 into a farming family in Sant Carles de la Ràpita, during his adolescence and youth he had access to a well-endowed library in Amposta belonging to the family he worked for. This library was what made his self-taught literary training possible, satisfying a thirst for reading that provided him with a profound knowledge of the Western tradition, from the Greek tragedians to the French and Russian novel of the nineteenth century. Arbó left school at the age of twelve to start work in an office; the feelings of marginalization and isolation that this caused in him are the origin of one of the

most recurrent themes in his writing: the prisoner. Subjugation to a grey job with no prospects which also prevented his making anything of his literary vocation prompted the decision to leave for Barcelona with the manuscripts of his first two novels in 1929.

1931 saw the publication of his first novel, *L'inútil combat*, quite a radical novelty on the Catalan literary scene. The book is written in the first person and presents the testimony of a man condemned, a tortured soul and one equally full of tenderness and anger. The testimony of a fugitive. In a reference to this work, which in many ways was a forerunner of what ten years later Camus and Sartre were to call the *existentialist novel*, Arbó said, "A man

writes so as to expel all the poison he has accumulated as a result of the falsity of his way of life".

Soon afterwards, in 1932, with *Terres de l'Ebre*, the author took a new approach to the novel. In *Terres de l'Ebre* Arbó comes close to the great ambition of constructing a microcosm where, as in the great classical works –Arbó himself referred to Euripides–, human striving is represented searching for the meaning of life. The focus of this novel, like that of the first, is also on what lies inside the characters: a small family saga with a tragic destiny; but at the same time we witness the recreation of a natural setting which featured frequently in Arbó's writing. In fact, *Terres de l'Ebre* is also the story of the



farmers' bitter struggle to turn the marshy land of the Ebre delta into fertile ricefields at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The conquest of this physical space also symbolizes Sebastià Juan Arbó's creation of a setting for his novels, one of the fundamental elements that make them into a solid, palpable world full of energy.

Having settled in Barcelona—he started work at the Generalitat's Department of Culture in 1933—, Arbó took an active part in the Barcelona cultural world. He contributed to the magazine *Mirador*, frequented the circles of the Ateneu Barcelonès and met one of the few great friends he was to make during his lifetime, the publisher Josep Janés. In 1933 he published *Hores en blanc*, originally entitled *Notes d'un estudiant que va morir boig*, a continuation of the treatment initiated in *L'inútil combat*. In *Camins de nit* (1935) Arbó tells another story filled with violence and tenderness, with certain novelties as regards *Terres de l'Ebre*: he extends the range of characters, defines more exactly the collective character representing the crowd and gives the novel a cosmic atmosphere by taking advantage of the consternation caused by Halley's comet in 1910 and by filling out the mythical figure of the mother, at the end of the novel, on the eve of World War I.

Tino Costa, more or less completed before 1939 but published in 1947, is the culminating moment of Arbó's career as a novelist. As well as completing the fabulation of the physical world that characterizes Arbó's novels, it takes to the limit the analysis of an ingenuous and tormented soul that is dragged towards destruction by a dark, relentless force. But in this same novel Arbó introduces a new character, the old man Baldà, whose sceptical, resigned view of life, which is not without its spark of hope, gradually gains ground over the pessimism that predominates in the first novels, and is later incarnated by

Pau Roda, in *L'espera* (1967), and by the teacher Pere Franch in *Entre la terra i el mar* (1966) and *La masia* (1957).

The Civil War came at the height of Arbó's creativity (he had by then written three plays for the theatre) and public recognition. Faced with this new situation, Arbó, who always lived directly or indirectly from writing, opted for writing in Castilian as well. In 1948 he won the Nadal prize for novels with *Sobre las piedras grises* and later published *Maria Molinari* (1954), amongst others. These books, which raised the curtain on the urban scenario, made no further essential contribution to the world of Arbó's novels; on the contrary, the characters lose intensity and the overall effect seems to lack the aggressive lyric drive of the first works. All the same, Arbó, who in this period came into contact with Castilian fiction writers like Delibes, Cela and Matute, made a considerable name for himself, mainly as a result of his contributions to the magazine *Destino*, the newspapers *La Vanguardia* and *ABC*, and the translations of his earlier works into various European languages. During these years he also wrote biographies of Cervantes, Verdaguer, Baroja and Oscar Wilde.

In the sixties Arbó revised his earlier books and went back to Catalan with a new cycle of novels set in the world of the Ebre. One of the best of these is *La masia* (1975), in which the house takes on a symbolic dimension as the site of the soul, like a shell protecting those who take shelter there and who face destruction on leaving it. The general descriptions of the landscape and in particular of the farmhouse help to emphasize the process by which the narrator introduces a mythical element into reality through his poetic evocations. It was Arbó's farewell to a landscape far removed in time and space which he had made into one of the essential themes of his literary creation: "Everything rested in an immense stillness; all along the coast wild ducks flew over the lakes; they flew in pairs, standing out against the light of the dawn with their long necks and heavy flight, flapping their short wings over the marshes, close to the sea. Here and there, from shacks, from the occasional lonely building, there rose a thin thread of smoke that wavered in the breeze and broke up slowly in the morning air. The trees stood in rows, ghostly in the morning light, along the side of the path, on top of the dykes, in the misty distance, and farther off, beyond Tortosa, the towering mountains were cloaked in an almost transparent blue mist; to the right, a light fog hung in the air, marking the course of the Ebre through the poplars and the reedbeds towards the nearby sea, and lay quietly over the waters."

Arbó's last years were especially hard and he died at the beginning of 1984 convinced that he had not received the recognition he deserved. In the last ten years, though, his best works have been repeatedly republished and the publication this year of his *Obra Catalana Completa* has once more made available to readers one of the solidest creations of any Catalan novelist this century. ■